



CUTLINE: JT Smith, Southern State Truck Driving Academy Director/Training Manager, works with a student on a virtual-reality simulator that allows for shifting and driving training without getting behind the wheel.

## **Getting better drivers on the road | *Truck driving shortage means more opportunities for locals***

People can expect the nationwide shortage of truck drivers to worsen in coming years, according to a recent report from an Indiana trucking authority. Local truck driving instructor JT Smith said there has never been a better time to enter the transportation industry.

Smith, who oversees Southern State’s Truck Driving Academy, said a longstanding demand for truck drivers has longevity beyond his lifetime.

“Everything still comes on a truck regardless of what it is, whether it’s groceries or gas,” Smith said. “Any store you want to shop at or anything online like Amazon uses trucks. Trains and planes can only get them so far – trucks get things where they need to go.”

Smith said if trucking lines were to shut down, stores would close in a matter of days.

According to the Indiana Motor Trucking Association, the trucking industry lacks 60,000 drivers across the country, and that number could grow to 100,000 in the next several years, WTHR news recently reported.

Smith said autonomous truck technology is still only in the early stages of development and will likely not be fully functional for years.

“I don’t see the demand for truck drivers going away any time soon,” he said. “Autonomous trucks are way, way in the future – probably not even in my kids’ future. It’s still going to take an actual driver behind the wheel to do the job.”

The truck driving industry has seen many changes in just the last few years, Smith said. With the advent of smart phones, tablets and on-board computer systems, truck driving has never been more efficient.

“Back in the day, you had to stop and use a payphone,” he said. “Now, you have phones and computers in the truck hands-free as you’re driving... You can get loads quicker, take care of your truck, use electronic logs and keep track of hours worked right down to the minute. It’s come a long way.”

Smith said Southern State offers high-tech training methods to prepare students for the road in changing times. The Truck Driving Academy uses virtual-reality simulators for shifting and driving training so students can safely learn techniques without getting behind the wheel, and the college will soon offer a tablet and smartphone app simulating pre-trip maintenance and preparation, Smith said.

Accompanying the technological changes in the trucking industry is a paradigm shift in the way society sees truck drivers, Smith said. “The stigma of being a truck driver has come a long way,” he said. “You can support a family on a single income and you can avoid all kinds of college debt. If you like to drive, truck driving is a great field to get into.”

Smith said potential truck drivers could qualify for a Class A Commercial Driver’s License in four weeks or eight weekends at a cost of \$5,300. The course for a Class B license, or passenger bus qualification, is two weeks and costs \$2,900.

“You’re basically just training to understand the basics and pass the CDL test to get your license,” Smith said.

Many area companies like R&L in Wilmington will hire truck drivers’ right out of school and put drivers through two to four weeks of further training, depending on the company.

Smith, who began trucking nearly 40 years ago, has never stopped loving the road, and he said he hopes to prepare more drivers for a long and rewarding career earning a living behind the wheel.

“I was pretty much born and raised in a milk truck,” he said. “I was always in the truck. It is just in my blood. I got my license and started driving at 18. Seven years ago, I got into the teaching part of it. I enjoy teaching because I’m hopefully getting more educated, better drivers on the road.”

Smith can be reached at 800-628-7722 ext. 4535 or by email at [jtsmith@sscc.edu](mailto:jtsmith@sscc.edu).

The truck diving academy has locations in Wilmington, West Union, Piketon, Jackson, Pomeroy and South Point.

For more information, please visit <https://www.sccc.edu/academics/programs/truck-driving.shtml>

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